

Joan Baez: I Am a Noise—A documentary about the American folk singer

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Joan Baez: I Am a Noise is a documentary film about the American folk singer named in the title. Born in 1941, Baez first sang in clubs as a teenager in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and, notably, at the first Newport Folk Festival in 1959. Her first album, *Joan Baez*, recorded in New York City for independent label Vanguard, was released in October 1960 to considerable acclaim and popular success.

A loose framework for the film, directed by Miri Navasky, Karen O'Connor, and Maeve O'Boyle, is provided by the singer's farewell tour in 2018-2019 (at least its US portion), which ended in Spain 60 years to the month after her debut at Newport. *I Am a Noise* makes use of Baez's personal archives, including previously unreleased home movies, artwork, diaries, therapy tapes and audio recordings. Whether the filmmakers' access to that material has led to entirely valuable results, however, is another matter.

I Am a Noise sheds relatively little light on Baez's artistic and social development, and what light it sheds on her inner life seems distorted. It is even less illuminating in regard to the period in which the singer came to prominence, the early 1960s. This is a shame, because Baez meant something to a generation and such a documentary might have been the occasion to explain her contradictory career and legacy. The filmmakers become caught up, with Baez's full participation, in the search for evidence of childhood trauma as an explanation for the singer's psychological vicissitudes. The last quarter of the film is virtually unwatchable.

Time and historical events have not been kind to Baez, and the film's generally dispirited, deeply confused outlook reflects her own, at least to some degree.

Joan Baez was a central figure in the resurgence of interest in—and popularity of—folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s. With her remarkable soprano voice, she made a mark along with figures such as Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Odetta, Dave Van Ronk, Tom Paxton, Carolyn Hester, Eric Andersen, Fred Neil, Tim Hardin, Judy Collins and many others.

I Am a Noise delves into Baez's family history, which has intriguing elements. Her mother, Joan Chandos Bridge (1913-2013), was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, the daughter of an Episcopalian minister. Her family emigrated to North America when she was a child. In 1936, she married Albert Baez (1912-2007), a Mexican-American physicist and eventual inventor of the X-ray microscope, who held various academic positions during the 1950s, and also worked for UNESCO in the 1960s.

Joan, the future singer, grew up largely in northern California, although her career began in the Boston area because her father had accepted a faculty position at MIT.

The documentary includes home movies of the Baez family in the

1950s. Joan had an older sister, Pauline, and a younger, Mimi Fariña, who had a career in music of her own.

In Cambridge, in 1958, she performs at the famous Club 47. We see singer-actor Theodore Bikel introducing her at Newport. At age 18, Baez becomes a "star overnight." Her 1960 album, entirely made up of traditional, occasionally grim songs, most of them featuring only Baez's voice and guitar, remained on the Billboard charts for over two years, itself an indicator of social and cultural shifts. In 1963, she adorns the cover of *Time* magazine.

Long-haired, often barefoot, described in glowing, semi-reverent terms, Baez represents a different current in American popular music. She participates in the Civil Rights movement, singing along with Bob Dylan, at the massive March on Washington in August 1963, and later joining various protests in the Jim Crow South. We see her marching with novelist James Baldwin, among others.

Her relationship with Dylan is inevitably treated. She is seen exuberantly calling him up on stage at a time when she was still more famous than he. Their relationship at this point, in 1964, seems a happy and productive one. "We were kids together" for a short time. Their final breaking apart in 1965 in England she describes as a nightmare, producing a state of "total demoralization." Dylan, she says, was "moving away from everybody." It "broke my heart," she adds.

Later, there are the protests against the Vietnam War. Baez sets up her "Non-violence institute" and envisions herself as another Gandhi. "We plan to save the world." Her then-husband David Harris goes to prison for refusing to serve in the military. She writes to Harris: "Nothing makes sense to me but you, me and the revolution."

After the end of the Vietnam War, Baez admits she feels "a little bit lost." She has to "figure out what I'm doing on earth." She acknowledges being dependent on sedative Quaaludes for eight years. At a certain point, she felt "rudderless." The career "fell off a cliff." She might be speaking for an entire generation, or a definite section of one, when Baez declaims, it was "time to go within, to that place inside."

Caught up apparently by the discredited "recovered memory therapy" trend, Baez in later life determined that she had been abused as a child by her father. This is examined in the final half-hour of *I Am a Noise*. She has no specific memories, but certain "feelings." There is "no proof," she concedes.

Baez describes herself as traumatized and damaged throughout much of her life. One has no way of knowing what did or did not take place in her family, but the notion that Baez was an emotionally crippled individual, barely able to function because of childhood damage, is belied by the history of her own music and performances,

and political interventions. She appears in the 1960s to be a vibrant, confident young woman, confident even to the point of presumptuousness and a little arrogance. Acquaintances seem to agree that Baez, beneath the Madonna-like persona, was fiercely ambitious.

If the singer is sad and even dispirited at this point in her life, age and the end of her performing career must of course be factors, but is there not also the matter of personal, professional and social disappointment? What happened to the idealism of her youth? What became of her colleagues, including figures like Dylan? What is the state of the popular music world? What is the state of the world? It doesn't apparently occur to Baez or the filmmakers that these larger, troubling processes and problems, poorly understood and merely perceived or felt as discouraging, play into her current mood.

The nature of Baez's social views has its own function in her state of befuddlement. Although her anti-establishment stance was no doubt sincere in the 1960s, and this comes across in performances, it was always shallow and muddled. (The fact that she was notoriously averse to reading and study cannot have helped.) Like much of the middle-class left of the time, her politics was an eclectic, pragmatic mix. In her case, a hash of pacifism, Gandhism and "non-violent resistance," environmentalism, populism and such. The "revolution," apart from which "nothing made sense" for her in 1970 or so, had no connection to the working class struggle for power. The word "socialism" does not come up.

Richard Barone (in *Music + Revolution: Greenwich Village in the 1960s*) suggests that the "sanctified image" of the early Baez, that of a "singular, serious, almost saintly, and beautiful young woman standing alone at the microphone, straight dark hair hanging down, and accompanying herself on guitar, as if in prayer" would not

have been alien to Baez. Her grandfather was a Methodist minister in Mexico and had founded the First Spanish Methodist Church in New York. Her father, a physicist and inventor of the X-ray reflection microscope who later worked for the United Nations, and mother, the daughter of an Episcopalian priest, had become Quakers. Baez was raised in a household of pacifism and humanitarianism.

It is distasteful, but not astonishing, to see Baez in the company of Hillary and Bill Clinton in *I Am a Noise*. Nor does it come as a surprise that she endorsed Barack Obama in 2008, although she later confessed to being disappointed. Again, this is the evolution and trajectory of a generation.

In any case, Baez is intriguing principally as an artist, an interpreter of songs. The interest in her music and folk music generally in the early 1960s expressed social developments. First of all, it was a protest against the official American culture, seen as empty, formulaic and inauthentic. In searching out the older country, bluegrass and blues musicians and performing or even imitating their songs, young people were seeking more truthful, often harsher presentations of reality. There was no place in the official culture for poverty, drunkenness and desperation, love that led to death, the depths of life.

A co-founder of Club 47 in Cambridge, Kalina Chopra, explained to author David Hajdu (*Positively 4th Street*) that Baez "was very serious, which was all part of the folk scene—very grave. And she was singing these songs most of us had never heard before. So when she sang about lost love, and she sang all these English ballads, it

somehow seemed important. So that for young people at that time, who were searching for things to be serious about—that was very powerful."

On the first track on Baez's first album, "Silver Dagger," a traditional song, a young woman tells her suitor that she can never marry because her mother, betrayed in love, holds a dagger in "her right hand" and "says that I can't be your bride." This was a far cry from the conventional pop songs of the time, but the record sold half a million copies, becoming the fourth-best-selling album of 1960.

In 1961, the British Trotskyists pointed to "signs of a break in the American ice-block ... in several key layers of society. Among the youth there has been growing criticism of the American way of life and an audience for various trends which reflect its cultural barrenness." (*The World Prospect of Socialism*) In the end, this discontent pointed toward the unresolved contradictions of American capitalism, the dominant world power and "leader of the free world," and foreshadowed significant social upheavals.

Baez was highly praised from the outset, but also sharply criticized. It was said that her singing was passionless, glum, self-serious. Fellow singer Joni Mitchell, for example, would assert that Baez had "a cold tone. She's chilly. She's not a soulful singer." Longtime music critic Robert Christgau argued that "Baez was much warmer and funnier as a person than as an artist." In a review of D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*, a 1967 documentary about Bob Dylan, film critic Andrew Sarris suggested that Baez, who figures prominently in the film, "takes the sting out of everything she sings with her very professional charm."

These comments contain a grain of truth, but only a grain. There is a slightly dry and pious character to some of her singing, even a flatness—in large doses, a sameness in tone. But audiences responded enthusiastically for a reason. Those problematic tendencies became more of an issue in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond, as her music lost its social and emotional purposefulness.

The best answer to the detractors are the performances themselves.

There is this full concert in England from 1965.

This short, charming duet with Bob Dylan from 1964.

A stirring performance (eventually with sister Mimi) at Sing Sing prison in Ossining, New York. Baez appropriately begins with "I Shall Be Released."

This extraordinary, informal session with bluegrass great Earl Scruggs and his sons.

This version of Dylan's Farewell Angelina

And, finally, this Brussels concert in 1966.



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